



Social issues: Building a safer site

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Published: November 10 2003 16:02 | Last Updated: November 10 2003 16:02

Mehmet Kastrati, an immigrant worker from Albania, says he joined the Greek construction workers' union after his employer, a sub-contractor on a project for the Athens Olympic games, sacked him for reporting an accident at the site.

Through his contacts at the union, Mr Kastrati, an experienced builder, was able to find another job at another games-related construction site. But hours are long and working conditions are hard, he says.

"We put in 14-hour days several times a week because of the rush to get the project finished. But the overtime isn't recognised in our wages. And the rush also means that safety regulations are ignored," he says.

Immigrants make up about 30 per cent of Greece's estimated 350,000 construction workers, according to the Federation of Greek Construction Workers. Albanians are the most numerous but many skilled Polish and Romanian workers have found jobs in Greece.

The construction sector is booming, driven by public sector infrastructure projects worth €11.5bn, which are co-financed by European Union structural funds and an expanding market for private sector housing. In the Athens area alone, projects for the 2004 Olympics are worth over €2.5bn.

However, there is growing concern about the safety of workers in the sector. Fatalities at construction sites have shown a steady increase in the past three years, reversing a previous declining trend. Last year 80 workers died in construction accidents, compared with 66 in 2000 and 76 in 2001, according to figures published by the labour ministry's health and safety inspectorate.

The figures represent an incidence of 25 fatal accidents for every 100,000 workers - double the EU average for the construction sector.

With most Olympic sports venues close to completion, fewer workers at games-related sites are putting in exceptionally long hours. Yet the figures look worse this year, with more than 60 fatalities reported in the first six months, representing a 50 per cent increase in risk over the previous year.

Six workers have died during construction of the Olympic Village, one of the biggest games-related projects. Because of delays in tendering procedures, the project to provide housing for 16,000 athletes and trainers was split among four companies that have raced to meet pressing deadlines.

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"We believe that bad practices that have emerged in the past few years have become entrenched," says Giannis Pasoulas, secretary general of the federation of construction workers. "Workers are under pressure to carry out double shifts or operate machinery without the necessary qualifications."

Private Greek construction companies carry out most public works projects, forming consortia to undertake the biggest projects. The sector is dominated by a dozen big groups, which hire local sub-contractors to carry out jobs that require lower skill levels and less sophisticated machinery.

Mr Pasoulas says the number of deaths may be under-reported because there are no measures in place to record those that are the delayed result of injuries suffered in construction site accidents. Moreover, occupational diseases are still not officially recorded in Greece.

The federation co-operates with the labour ministry inspectors to report and record accidents "because the inspectorate is seriously understaffed and can't get around to as many sites as they should," he says.

While legislation bringing Greece in line with EU directives on occupational health and safety was approved seven years ago, the regulations started to be implemented only in 2000 for big public works projects. Contractors are required to appoint a safety co-ordinator, keep health and safety files and have a doctor in attendance at construction sites where more than 50 workers are employed.

Ilias Banoutsas, managing director of Ergonomia, an Athens-based occupational safety and health consultancy, says the delay in implementing the law at a time of activity has had a significant cost: "We've had an increased level of fatalities after a period when the health and safety picture in Greece had been improving and the overall level of occupational injuries had been steadily declining, in line with the rest of the EU."

However, the labour ministry inspectorate has launched a two-year enforcement campaign to make contractors comply with the regulations. Their first "blitz" last June involved surprise visits to almost 1,300 construction sites. Work was temporarily halted at more than 100 sites and prosecution proceedings were started against 22 contractors.

Mr Chronis Polychroniou, special secretary at the health and safety inspectorate, says: "The degree of compliance regarding occupational safety in the Greek construction sector is changing positively and rapidly. Greece is comparable with other European countries regarding the quality of enforcement, in spite of the large number of Olympic works in progress."

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